

Is (anyone's) God really big enough?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In my evangelical youth my impressionable mind was impressed with the questions raised by a popular book: "Your God is Too Small." I thought that was a great challenge to think bigger of our Great, Greater, Greatest God. One pastor even started a Big God Ministries. After all, what could a small god do for us? A limited, weak deity wasn't good enough. As Psalm 95 proclaims, we worshipped the God above all gods.

In the "Whose God is the greatest?" world of competitive religion, that old question, "How small is your God?" becomes "How big is your God, and is that God big enough?" Big enough for what? Exactly.

Reading an article in the "Free Inquiry" magazine published by the Center for Inquiry, this caught my eye: "The authors of Genesis proclaim that God made the heavens and earth in less than a week. This feat must have amazed these Bronze Age authors, even though they thought the heavens extended only so far as the sky above them...Of course, they did not know what stars, planets or

galaxies were. Nor did they know of the trillions of microscopic bacteria living in their guts or the 80 billion nerve cells in their brains." To drive home the point, the article states: "We now know that the universe is so much bigger and so much more complex. From the deep field images of our space telescopes, scientists estimate that the ever-expanding universe contains perhaps two trillion galaxies, with many containing 100 to 200 billion stars" ("Is God Big Enough for the Universe? Psychological Reflections on Religious and Scientific Beliefs," D. Alan Bensley, Free Inquiry, December 2023/January 2024). This begs the question, doesn't it? How big (or small) is the God you believe in?

The disruptive question about the creation and the size of a creator is both personal and universal — literally cosmic. Imagining that one's own personal divinity is especially concerned to watch over them while managing the wide expanse of the cosmos presents a rather large problem. Bensley's essay clarifies the issue: "The answer to the rhetorical question 'Is God big enough for the universe?' is that the description of God in religious texts has not kept pace with a scientifically informed worldview." That might be fairly obvious, but he goes further: "The archaic writings of monotheistic religions describe a god with much less grandeur,

scope and understanding than would be reasonably expected of an omniscient, all-powerful creator who manages a universe that is an estimated 93 billion light years across and still expanding." When a divine power offers one book of one religion in one part of earth, one small planet in one galaxy in an incredibly vast universe, that divine power appears quite restricted, confined. Is a god truly above, beyond, behind, beneath the universe, or narrow-mindedly focused on an infinitesimally small piece of sand in space, and one devoted group of ants who inhabit that? Is a Creator somehow "outside" the universe, or, as pantheists claim, one with everything?

No matter what we individually believe about these matters, it matters. Our finite worldview also reflects our grander universal view. Perhaps more significantly, this influences our view of others, and how we treat them. When our image of a divine being colors or clouds our view, I would suggest it has important implications and consequences. Let's say, one person believes their god is most Good, most Great, most Powerful. Does that deity become a kind of Big Bully? That is, does that god condescend to judge and punish everyone else who doesn't acknowledge their greatness? Does this god beat up all the other gods like a playground bully? Or does one's chosen deity "embody" love, compas-

sion, justice? In other words, are they a kind parent or a "crowned ruffian," as Thomas Paine described?

Secular people don't tend to get caught in these webs of questions because most religions have a corner on the market when it comes to competition over faith and theology. Agnostics and atheists usually don't have the time to banter over various beliefs or have much interest in measuring sizes of Supreme Beings. As the Free Inquiry article explains the contrast between the Big God, Little God and No God folks: "[skeptical people] acquire their knowledge using an approach that relies on critical reflection and cogent reasoning...The resultant scientific knowledge challenges the paranormal and supernatural claims of religion." So, what we have learned about the universe since religions were created and sacred scriptures were first published, tells us that any Creator-God has to be much bigger/greater (and frankly more creative) than any divinity ever preached.

Why does size matter in the case of god or religion? How small does it make you feel?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).